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 **CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**  
Office of Legislative Counsel  
Washington, D. C. 20505  
Telephone:  (Code 143-6121)  
**26 DEC 1978**

**TO:** Mr. Hal Ford-  
Select Committee on Intelligence  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Hal:

gave this to me and  
suggested you might be interested  
in reading it.

Assistant Legislative Counsel

Enclosure

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EDITIONS

USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series  
Volume IV  
Monograph 6

# LAST FLIGHT FROM SAIGON



Volume Edited by:  
Lt. Col. A.J.C. Lavalley

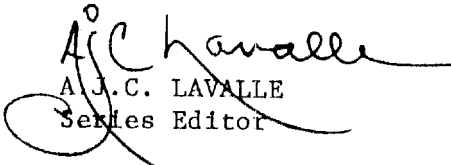
## Foreword

The Southeast Asia Monograph Series is designed and dedicated to telling the story of USAF's participation in the Vietnam War. This monograph, the sixth in the Series, adds another exciting chapter to our continuing effort to bring forth and highlight the dedication, courage, and professionalism of the U.S. airman in combat. The primary intent of this series is to emphasize and dramatize the human aspects of this long and frustrating struggle, straying somewhat away from the cold hard statistics of "tons of bombs dropped" and "structures destroyed," etc.; frequently the headliners in historical presentations.

"Last Flight From Saigon" is an exciting and moving account of how all our Services, as well as several civilian agencies, pulled together to pull-off the largest aerial evacuation in history—what many have referred to as a modern day Dunkirk. The three authors, intimately involved with the evacuation from beginning to end, have carefully pieced together an amazing story of courage, determination and American ingenuity. Above all, it's a story about saving lives; one that is seldom told in times of war. All too often, critics of armed conflict make their targets out to be something less than human, bent on death and destruction. One need only study the enormity of the effort and cost that went into the "evacuation of Saigon," and the resultant thousands of lives that were saved, to realize that the American fighting man is just as capable, and more eager, to save lives than he is in having to wage war.

The reader can help tell this story by sharing this book with his friends.

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A.J.C. LAVALLEY  
Series Editor

Printing Office

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## MONOGRAPH 6

### Last Flight From Saigon

Authors: Thomas G. Tobin, Lt Colonel, USAF  
Arthur E. Lachr, Lt Colonel, USAF  
John F. Hilgenberg, Lt Colonel, USAF

Monograph Edited by  
Lt Col David R. Mets

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## Preface

On the last two days in April 1975, Operation FREQUENT WIND, the evacuation of Vietnam, ended a twenty-year agony for the United States. A trial for America was done. The last 45 days of her presence in South Vietnam may seem almost insignificant compared to the previous decades of pain. But, in a continuous effort under ever-increasing pressure, the US Embassy in Saigon, and its Defense Attache Office (DAO) there, helped plan, prepare for, and ultimately conduct, the final evacuation from South Vietnam. Operation FREQUENT WIND extracted 130,000 people including: Vietnamese citizens, Third Country Nationals and US citizens—a truly important feat which will continue to affect the United States for some time to come.

Faced with hundreds of hard decisions, enormous logistical requirements, continuous security problems, and the threat of enemy military action, American civilians and military men conducted an efficient evacuation. Graham Martin, the last US Ambassador to South Vietnam, and the man in overall charge of the evacuation, said that in the long run the extraction at Saigon would surely be judged as "a hell of a good job."

On the evening of 29 April 1975, USAF Lieutenant Colonels Arthur E. Laehr and John F. Hilgenberg jumped off CH-53 helicopters onto the deck of the *USS Midway*, lying 30 miles off the coast of South Vietnam near Vung Tau. For the first time in several weeks, each breathed a huge sigh of relief; for them, the evacuation of Saigon—FREQUENT WIND—was finally over.

Over 45 minutes earlier, both had embarked on separate CH-53s in the tennis court helicopter landing zone adjacent to the Defense Attache Office on Tan Son Nhut (TSN) Air Base. From the Defense Attache office building (formerly MACV Headquarters), huge clouds of black smoke could be seen rising from the impact of intermittent rocket and artillery shells on the main air base—barely a quarter mile away. Several blocks to the east, a huge fireball erupted in the

vicinity of the Pacific Architects and Engineers' warehouse, the building of a contractor who maintained the last of the US facilities in Vietnam. The blaze cast an eerie, flickering light on the whole area—where over 20 years of American effort was coming to an end.

In Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Thailand, 450 miles away, Air Force Lt Colonel Thomas G. Tobin, who was pulled from the Saigon office on 17 April to advise and coordinate planning and execution of the evacuation at the United States Support Advisory Group (USSAG-7th Air Force), wondered just what had happened to his friends. In the last hours, communications between Nakhon Phanom, Saigon, Hawaii, and Washington had been intermittent, and reports could not confirm just who or how many got out.

In the days following the evacuation, the three officers met in Hawaii to help prepare the final assessment of the US effort in South Vietnam. They had time to reflect on why the Republic of Vietnam disintegrated, but also, on how the evacuation of Saigon succeeded—despite what appeared to be very difficult odds. Rejoined again at the Air War College in Alabama, the three officers decided to write the story of the last days of the Thieu regime and of the American evacuation. Their account of the air escape from the falling city is filled with examples of determination, fear, confusion, and—most significantly—the professionalism of those who participated.

This story has a dual theme, the parts of which are inseparable. It weaves together the tremendous efforts of the people on the ground with the inherent speed and flexibility of air power, which made the whole escape possible. It should become obvious to the reader that both parts were absolutely necessary to success.

Air power was a pervasive element of the American effort to keep South Vietnam free. It was used both against the Viet Cong (VC) and the conventional North Vietnamese Army forces (NVA) who infiltrated the south, and military targets in North Vietnam. Most of the roles of air power were used: from reconnaissance, close air support, and airlift in the south, to interdiction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other North Vietnamese lines of communication and in the north. Air power helped defeat the massive North Vietnamese Army invasion of 1972; in the Linebacker II raids in December of the same year it was used against the enemy heartland, where it was widely acclaimed as the prime factor which forced Hanoi back to the negotiating table. Presidential Special Assistant Henry Kissinger remarked on the role of Linebacker II during a January 1973 press conference:

I was asked in October whether the bombing or mining of May 8 brought about the breakthrough in October, and I said then I did not want to speculate on North Vietnamese motives. I have too much trouble analyzing our own . . .

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I will give the same answer to your question, but I will say that there was a deadlock which was described in the middle of December, and there was a rapid movement when negotiations resumed on a technical level on January 3 and on the substantive level of January 8. These facts have to be analyzed by each person by himself . . .

Joseph Alsop, in the *Washington Post* of 24 January 1973, analyzed the facts in this way:

There is no question at all that the renewed bombing got the President what he was aiming for. Significantly, Hanoi had never broken off communications with Washington, even when the bombing was at its worst. In the end, a message came from Hanoi to the President, indicating that negotiations would be resumed on an acceptable and serious basis.

Thus, to a large extent, the US had come to Vietnam by air and had sustained her own forces and those of her allies by air support. Now, in the end, she left by air in the largest aerial evacuation in history. This operation, first code named TALON VISE and then FREQUENT WIND, was a remarkable success. The story deserves to be told. In spite of the disappointments of the war as a whole, the authors believe history will substantiate the idea that the evacuation of Vietnam was one of America's great aerial accomplishments.

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Don - I believe you should call this publication to the attention of Hal Ford. It's a good and balanced description of the evacuation of Saigon.